

"A BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE HISTORY OF THE JEWISH COMMUNITY OF TERRE HAUTE, INDIANA"

The Terre Haute Jewish Community has been a major influence for good in the city, regionally, and in some cases nationally. Our people have had a substantial impact on the health, education, culture and economy of West Central Indiana. A Jewish person is a member of an extended family of Jewish people who believe in one living God, and who through communal practices and rituals work together for the betterment of the entire Jewish community, and the outer community. This is accomplished through prayer, the study of Torah, and charity. We as a community, since 1849, have revered God in this manner.

The first written record of a member of the Jewish community of Terre Haute begins in 1827 with the purchase of land by the attorney Samuel Judah. Mr. Judah later became an Indiana legislator, representing the local district and rising to become Speaker of the 25th General Assembly of the State of Indiana.

In 1845 David H. Arnold and others purchased a piece of land at First Street and Eighth Avenue in Terre Haute for a burial ground. This was followed in 1849 by the formation of a burial society, the beginning of communal and religious Jewish life in Terre Haute. David H. Arnold was the president of the organization.

Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise, founder of the American Reform Jewish movement, first came to Terre Haute July 10, 1856. He found about 20 Jewish families in town. At that time Rabbi Wise described Terre Haute as sober, industrious, intelligent people respected by their neighbors. He said "Judaism is forgotten nowhere...it demonstrates its vitality and unabated energy. The Jew remains attached to his faith in the western worlds..."

In 1858 the burial society formally organized as a Jewish congregation and Burial Society, the Zion's Geminde. Charles Alshuler, one of the original founders of the burial society, became the president. The first synagogue was located in Carr's Hall, the 2nd floor of the Trotsky Building, which was the southwest corner of 4th and Walnut Streets.

June 8, 1868, the Gan Eden Lodge # 110 of the independent order of B'nai B'rith was founded. In 1872, the Hebrew Ladies Benevolent Aid Society was founded as well as the Jewish Aid Society. They took over the charitable work performed by Jewish people, for all members of the Terre Haute Community. This was done long before there was organized charity. In 1886, fifteen men formed the first Orthodox Synagogue B'nai Abraham. It was located in a rental hall at 11th and Wabash. H. G. Goldberg was the first president.

Jewish people opened stores, became professionals, founded numerous Jewish organizations, participated actively in Terre Haute community life and became known for their work ethic and philanthropy.

In 1891 Rabbi Wise returned to Terre Haute to install Rabbi Alexander Lyons as the first full time Rabbi of the Reform congregation. His presentation discussed the "Past, Present and Future" of Jewish life. The first permanent building was at 420 South 4th Street. Rabbi Lyons became known in Terre Haute and the surrounding territory as a speaker of great eloquence and power and as a public man of broad caliber.

In 1926, the members of B'nai Abraham, dedicated a new Orthodox synagogue at 5th and Poplar Streets. In 1934 the two Terre Haute congregations merged administratively, creating the United Temple. Later the name changed to United Hebrew Congregation, still our name. Reform and Orthodox worship, Religious School and Hebrew Schools were provided using both buildings. We had a Jewish Boy Scout Troop, Agricultural Girls Group, Council of Jewish Juniors, the Temple Ladies Auxiliary, a Zionist organization, the Phoenix Country Club, the Jewish Welfare Fund and a Jewish War Veterans organization (including 90 members) were among the related organizations and activities in operation.

The Jews of Terre Haute were involved in the life of the general community in music drama, other arts, law, politics, medicine, universities and businesses. This involvement continues. Although the number of families grew and then decreased over the 150 years, there is a strong Jewish presence in Terre Haute, which will continue into the future.

On April 30 and May 1, 1999, we celebrate the 150th Anniversary of Terre Haute Jewish life. The president of the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, Rabbi Eric Yoffie, will set forth our challenge for the future when he takes Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise's title, the "Past, Present and Future" of Jewish life. Rabbi Yoffie's visit and address is confirmation of the vitality of the Terre Haute Jewish Community.